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THE ORIGIN OF LETTERS AND NUMERALS ACCORDING TO THE SEFER YEŞIRAH*

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THE TEXT

No Hebrew book has been so tampered with as the Sefer Yeşirah. As early as the tenth century there existed several versions of it, varying in length and in arrangement. There were the short and the long version, which were edited in Mantua in 1562, and Saadya's text, edited by M. Lambert, in Paris, in 1891. Each of these three texts is different from the others. Although Saadya's version is almost of the same length as Mantua II, it differs materially therefrom in the arrangement of the chapters and the paragraphs, and it thus happens that the matter contained in one chapter in Mantua II may be found scattered through several chapters in Saadya's text; while entire paragraphs in Saadya's text are cut up and distributed among three different chapters in Mantua II. Both Mantua texts agree in a general way with each other in their arrangement, but Mantua II contains twice as much material as Mantua I, the former numbering about 2400 words, the latter only 1200 words.

A critical study leads to the conclusion that these versions contain only about 600 words of the original Sefer

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Yeşirah. The remaining 600 words in Mantua I or the 1800 words in Mantua II are all interpolations and not of the original Sefer Yeşirah. All the matter belonging to the original Sefer Yeşirah, I arranged as a separate treatise, which may be referred to as Sefer Yeşirah I. All the interpolations I arranged also as a separate treatise, which may be referred to as Sefer Yeşirah II. Having already explained the Sefer Yeşirah I, it now remains to explain the Sefer Yeşirah II.

Of the Sefer Yeşirah II little need be said; it abounds in trifles, contradictions, and repetitions. Although it was intended as a commentary on Sefer Yeşirah I, its author had no conception whatever of what the original Sefer Yeşirah was. He saw in it only a cosmogony based upon the letters of the alphabet and the Sefirot. According to him, God created the universe with thirty-two wonderful ways of wisdom. These ways are the ten Sefirot and the twenty-two letters. The ten Sefirot are: The Spirit of God, Air, Water, Fire, Height, Depth, East, West, North, and South. From the first emanated the second; from the second the third, from the third the fourth, and the remaining six Sefirot emanated from the six permutations of the letters הוּי. With the second Sefirah (Air) God created the twenty-two letters, and divided them into three parts, or books (שְׁלֹשָׁה סְפָרִים); three mothers אִמֵּשׁ; seven double letters הָזוּ חֲמִי לָנֶם עֶצֶק בִּנְיָד כִּפְרִית, and twelve simple letters: הָזוּ חֲמִי לָנֶם עֶצֶק. With these three classes, or groups, of letters were created the various parts of the world (עוֹלָם), of the year (שָׁנָה), and of the soul (נֶפֶשׁ).

The author of the Sefer Yeşirah II contradicts himself; he explains that by the three mother letters, אִמֵּשׁ, which the original Sefer Yeşirah declares to be a "great secret"

(סוד גדול), are meant the letters הוי of the great name יה"ו; the mothers thus not being a separate class at all, but part of the simple letters.

As a matter of fact, he himself abandons the division of the letters into three parts, and rearranges them in a two-fold division, one of ten and one of twelve letters. For, finally, he counts the letters אמש with the seven double letters כפרת בנר, as one class. The whole theory of the world, of the year, and of the soul, is expressed by tens and twelves. Indeed he says³⁹ as follows:

“עולם ספירתו בעשרה ושנים עשר
שנה ספירתה בעשרה ושנים עשר
נפש ספירתה בעשרה ושנים עשר”

“The world is counted by ten and twelve. . . .

The year is counted by ten and twelve. . . .

The soul is counted by ten and twelve. . . .”

It therefore follows that, according to the author of the Sefer Yeṣirah II, the twenty-two letters are divided into ten double כפרת בנר, אמש and twelve simple letters, הוו חטי לנס עצק. According to the author of the Sefer Yeṣirah II, however, each double letter represents only one way of wisdom, as each simple letter does. The twenty-two letters, therefore, are according to him, only twenty-two ways of wisdom. The remaining ten ways of wisdom are the ten Sefirot, which he explained to be the Spirit of God, air, water, fire, height, depth, east, west, north, and south. The author of the Sefer Yeṣirah II understood the numeral words ארבע ... שלש ... שתים ... אחת⁴⁰, occurring in the original Sefer Yeṣirah, to mean first, second, third, and

³⁹ Mantua II, chap. II, Sepher Yeṣirah II, chap. I.

⁴⁰ See text, §§ 18-21.

fourth. He imagined that the author of the original Sefer Yeşirah had counted only four Sefirot, and had forgotten to count the remaining six Sefirot, and after explaining that the four Sefirot are the Spirit of God, air, water, and fire, he counted height, depth, east, west, north, and south as six Sefirot to complete the number of the ten Sefirot. The truth is that the numerals שלש שתיים אחת ארבע mean, not first, second, third, and fourth; but one, two, three, and four, and these numbers themselves are the ten Sefirot from which all letters of the alphabet (particularly the vowel-letters) originated. The Sefirot, therefore, cannot be counted as ten separate ways of wisdom. The latter view requires that the twenty-two letters shall be taken to be all the thirty-two ways of wisdom, not only twenty-two ways of wisdom as explained by the Sefer Yeşirah II which is followed by all commentators.

Saadya, who was the first to divide the letters into five groups בומף, גיכק, דמלנת, וסשרץ, אההע, believed all the letters to be consonants. He interpolated this division in the Sefer Yeşirah without knowing that by אמות the original Sefer Yeşirah meant vowels. The first to perceive that אמות meant vowels was Dunash Ibn Tamim,⁴¹ who explained that by the three mother letters אמיש the Sefer Yeşirah meant the three vowel letters אוי. He failed, however, to see that by way of contrast תולדות must necessarily mean consonants. Now, he knew that his version of the Sefer Yeşirah contained many mistakes, that ignorant people had blended the original and an early commentary,⁴² and consequently the original text did not exist. Yet he did not perceive the absurdity of the division of the letters into three classes named: three

⁴¹ Sefer Yeşirah, London 1902, p. 45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

mother letters **אמש**, seven double letters **בגר כפרת**, and twelve simple letters, **הח חטי לנס עצק**. The category 'mothers' (**אמות**) is not in any sense coordinate with that of "double letters" and "simple letters," which contrast admirably with each other. Moreover, he failed to perceive that according to the Sefer Yeṣirah, there are ten double letters and not only seven. He is also at variance with all the known versions of the text, which give twelve simple letters, while he, in counting the total number of sounds 29, of which 14 are contained in the seven double letters **בגר כפרת**, makes the simple letters number 15. Besides it is very hard to understand how Dunash could have counted the letters **אוי** as simple letters having one sound, and declare at the same time that originally they were vowels and consequently must have had several sounds: namely **י** the sounds of *i* and *e*; **ו** of *w*, *u* and *o*; **א** of *a* and other vowel sounds, as believed by Kimḥi⁴³ and Ephodi.⁴⁴

Long before I ever saw the Sefer Yeṣirah, I had concluded that the Hebrew alphabet consisted of ten letters with double sounds and twelve letters with simple sounds; thus representing thirty-two sounds. I came to this conclusion in investigating the pronunciation of the vowels, which the reader will find in my **לחקון הנקוד והקריאה** in which I have discussed it at length. The ten double letters are: **ת, ש, ר, פ, ב, ו, ג, ד, נ, א**, and the twelve simple letters are: **ק, צ, ע, ס, ג, מ, ל, י, ח, ז, ה**.

I base this division on the assumption that the letters **אעוי** are the original vowels of the Hebrew alphabet, and that the true sounds of these letters were as follows: **ע** = *a*, **א** = *e*, **א** = *o*, **י** = *i*, **ו** = *u*, **ו** = *v*. Hence the letters

⁴³ Miklol, Fürth 1793, p. 87.

⁴⁴ Maaseh Efod, Wien 1865, p. 35.

אז are also double letters, so that these together with the six letters כפת, בנר כפת, the letter ר, and the letter ש were known to be double letters: hence, ten letters with double sounds. After reaching this conclusion, I found that the division of the letters of the Sefer Yeşirah bore a decided similarity to it. In fact, the Sefer Yeşirah gives the same number and the same classification of the single letters; the only difference is that it counts the ו among the simple letters, while I considered the ו as a double letter, and gave instead the מ. Nevertheless, I do not believe, from a grammatical point of view, that the author of the original Sefer Yeşirah could have counted the letter ו as a simple letter instead of the letter מ, and could have counted only seven double letters without including at least the letter ש which is still pronounced as a double letter by a great majority of the Jewish people. Further investigation proved that anciently there were counted ten double letters.

As is well known, some old grammarians, among whom was the author of the *Diḳduḳe ha-Te'amim*, counted the final letters as separate letters, thus making the total number of the letters of the alphabet twenty-seven. They apparently based their calculation upon the saying of the Talmud and Midrash that the letters אמת form respectively the beginning, the middle, and the end of the alphabet,⁴⁵ which can be true only if we count the finals as separate letters and thus make the total number twenty-seven, for otherwise the מ can not be in the middle of the alphabet. Convinced that there are ten double letters and twelve simple letters, I concluded that there must have been a time when the Hebrew alphabet was reckoned thirty-two letters,

⁴⁵ According to Rashi, Job 28, 17, the word אמת occurred in the Sefer Yeşirah. See above in volume ii, p. 568.

without the final letters, and thirty-seven or thirty-nine with the final letters, as follows:

א.א.ב.ב.ג.ג.ד.ד.ה.ה.ו.ו.ז.ז.ח.ח.ט.ט.י.י.כ.כ.ל.ל.מ.מ.נ.נ.ס.ס.פ.פ.צ.צ.ק.ק.ר.ר.ש.ש.ת.ת.

In such an arrangement of the letters, not the מ, but the letter ל is in the middle of the alphabet.

On reaching this conclusion, I sought to find some authority in the ancient literature for placing the ל in the middle of the alphabet. This fact, if established, would prove the correctness of my views on the Hebrew vowel points and their relation to the vowel letters א.ו.י.ע as explained in חק.ו.ה.ק.ר.י.א.ה and ל.ח.ק.ו.ה.נ.ק.ו.ר and it would also prove that the original Sefer Yeṣirah gave the number of double sound letters as ten, and not seven. To my great delight, I found in the א.ו.ח.י.ו.ת. ד.ר.ב.י ע.ק.י.ב.א the following: "Why is the letter ל higher than the other letters? Because it is in the middle of the letters." I also found in the Midrash Tadshe⁴⁶ that the letter ל is in the middle of the letters. These passages make it clear that the ancients counted ten double letters, and in their arrangement of the alphabet, they sometimes counted them as twenty. This seemed to justify my reading of the ten double letters א, ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ז, ח, ט, י, ע, ש, ק, ר, ל, מ, נ, ס, פ, צ, ת, in the original Sefer Yeṣirah, and not seven, and my contention that by the thirty-two ways of wisdom are meant the thirty-two sounds of the Hebrew alphabet, consisting of ten double letters and twelve simple letters.

The commentators not only failed to explain the combinations of the letters as the Sefer Yeṣirah directs them to be made, but they even altered the text, to make it harmonize with their mistaken interpretations. So early an authority as Saadya⁴⁷ mentions

⁴⁶ Epstein, מקרמוניות היהודים, Wien 1887, p. XVIII.

⁴⁷ *Commentaire sur le Sefer Yezira*, Paris 1891, p. 80.

that in all the versions of the Sefer Yeşirah he had seen, the text gave 221 divisions (שערים). He corrected this to read 231 divisions (שערים), and most of the commentators and editors adopted his reading. In Mantua II, chap. II, occurs the reading 241 divisions (שערים). Barzeloni⁴⁸ mentions that in some versions there are 222 divisions (שערים), but his own opinion is that the correct reading is 462 divisions (שערים).

AUTHORSHIP

Thus far, it has been impossible to determine the age and authorship of the Sefer Yeşirah. Jewish tradition claims divine origin for it: it was intrusted by the Lord to Adam and afterwards to Abraham. A very interesting passage concerning Abraham and his relation to the Sefer Yeşirah is quoted by J. Barzeloni, in his commentary on the Sefer Yeşirah (p. 268), from an ancient text.

מצינו בנוסחא דראשונים הכי :

וכשנולד אברהם אבינו אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני ה' רבנו של עולם אהוב יש לך בעולם ותכסה אותו ממנו כלום מיד אמר ה' המכסה אני מאברהם ונמלך בתורה ואמר לה בתי בואי ונשיאך לאברהם אהובי, אמרה לפניו לאו עד שיבוא עניו וישא ענוה מיד נמלך ה' בספר יצירה ואמר בן . ומסרו לאברהם והיה יושב יחיד ומעיין בו ולא היה יכול להבין בו כלום עד שיצאה בת קול ואמרה לו כלום אתה מבקש להשוות עצמך אלי אני אחד ובראתי ספר יצירה וחקרתי בו ואתה לא תוכל להבין בו יחיד קרב לעצמך חבר והביטו בו שניכם ותבינו בו מיד הלך אברהם לשם רבו וישב עמו ג' שנים והביטו וידעו לצור את העולם ועד עכשיו אין לך אדם שיבין בו יחיד אלא שני חכמים ולא יבינוהו עד ג' שנים וכשיבינוהו יוכלו לעשות כל מהלכם [מה שלבם?] חפץ וכשהבין בו אברהם הוסיף חכמה יתירה ולימד כל התורה כולה.

⁴⁸ Commentary on the Sefer Yezira, Berlin 1885, p. 209.

“We find in an ancient reading as follows: When Abraham, our father, was born, the angels of ministry said to the Holy One, blessed be He; ‘O Lord of the World! Thou hast a beloved one in the world, wilt Thou conceal anything from him?’ Directly, the Holy One, blessed be He said: ‘Shall I conceal from Abraham?’ and consulted the Torah. He said to her: ‘My daughter, come and we will marry thee to Abraham My beloved.’ She said to him: ‘No, not until the meek one comes and takes meekness.’ God then consulted the Sefer Yeşirah, which said, ‘Yes.’ God then handed it over to Abraham, who sat by himself studying it, without being able to understand anything, until a heavenly voice came forth and said: ‘Dost thou seek to compare thyself with Me? I am ‘One,’ I created the Sefer Yeşirah, and studied it. But thou canst not understand it alone. Get thee an associate, and look into it together, you will then understand.’ At once, Abraham went to his teacher Shem, and stayed with him three years. They looked into it and they knew how to form the world. From that time to this, there is no man who can understand it alone, there must be two wise men, and they cannot understand it before three years. But when they do understand it, they can do anything their hearts desire. When Abraham understood it, his wisdom increased greatly, and he taught the whole law.”

The world which Abraham and his teacher Shem were able to form after three years of study of the Sefer Yeşirah may be understood to mean the world of letters. Indeed, the invention of letters was anciently spoken of as the creation of the universe.

The names of Moses, Ezra, and Rabbi Akiba have also been advanced as the authors of the Sefer Yeşirah. The

attribution of the work to Rabbi Akiba undoubtedly rests on a confusion of titles. The *Sefer Yeṣirah* was called by ancient writers *אותיות של אברהם אבינו*, and was confounded with the Midrash *אותיות של רבי עקיבא*, which is called by some authors *Sefer Yeṣirah*. Thus Gedaliah Ibn Yahya, in his *Shalshet ha-Kabbalah*, says:

והוא חבר ספר מכילתין וספר יצירה על הקבלה ויש ספר יצירה שחבר אברהם אשר הרמב"ן חבר פירוש גדול ונפלא עליו.

"He composed the *Sefer Mekiltin*, and the *Sefer Yeṣirah* on Kabbalah. There is a *Sefer Yeṣirah* composed by Abraham, to which Naḥmanides made a great and wonderful commentary."

This passage was apparently misunderstood by some later writers, who imagined that Rabbi Akiba was the author of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* attributed to Abraham. Hence Isaac de Lates' criticism in the introduction to the *Zohar*:

ועוד מי התיר לרבי עקיבא לכתוב ספר יצירה וקראוהו משנה שהיתה שומה בפיהם בקבלה מאברהם.

"Besides, who permitted Rabbi Akiba to write the *Sefer Yeṣirah*? They called it *Mishnah*, and it was handed down to them by oral tradition from Abraham."

Moses Cordovero flatly denies Rabbi Akiba's authorship of the *Sefer Yeṣirah*. In the *Pardes Rimmonim* he says:

והנה אתנו ספר יצירה המכונה לאברהם אבינו עליו השלום ויש מכנים אותו לרבי עקיבא ואינה מוסכמת.

"We have a *Sefer Yeṣirah* attributed to Abraham. Some ascribe it to Rabbi Akiba, but there is no general agreement."

Modern writers are also divided in their opinions concerning the age of the Sefer Yeṣirah. Some of them believe it to be a production of the first or the second century B. C.; others place it in the Gaonic period, ranging from the seventh to the ninth century of the Christian Era. My personal inclination is to accept the late date (750-931) for that portion of the book which has been referred to as Sefer Yeṣirah II, in the discussion of the text; but there can be no doubt that the part containing the account of the origin of letters, which was explained above, is pre-talmudic, and is referred to in the Talmud in the following passage:

רבא ברא גברא (רש"י ע"י ספר יצירה שלמדו צרוף אותיות של שם) שדריה לקמיה דרבי זירא הוי קא משתעי בהדיה ולא הוה קא מהדר ליה א"ל מן חבריא את הדר לעפריך. רב חנינא ורב אושעיה הוו יתבי כל מעלי שבתא ועסקי בספר יצירה ומיברי להו עיגלא תילתא ואכלי ליה.⁴⁹

בדרב חנינא ורב אושעיא כל מעלי שבתא הוו עסקי בהלכות יצירה ומיברי להו עיגלא תילתא ואכלי ליה.⁵⁰

"Rabba created a man (Rashi says, through the Sefer Yeṣirah), and sent him to Rabba Zera who spoke to him, but received no answer. He then said to him, "You are a creature of the learned, return to your dust."

"Rab Ḥanina and Rab Oshaiah sat the entire eve of the sabbath studying the Sefer Yeṣirah and created a three year old calf, and ate it"... "Like the case of Rab Ḥanina and Rab Oshaiah who studied the Hilkot Yeṣirah every Friday, and a three year old calf was created for them, which they ate."

The Sefer Yeṣirah and the Hilkot Yeṣirah mentioned in these passages are undoubtedly our original Sefer

⁴⁹ Sanhedrin 65b.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 67b.

Yeṣirah, from which was borrowed the Baraita beginning with the words of the Sefer Yeṣirah:

תהו זה קו ירוק שמקיף את כל העולם כולו.⁵¹

"Void is a green line that surrounds the whole universe."

This passage must have been a part of the original Sefer Yeṣirah and not a later interpolation, for it tallies with the paragraphs before and after it, so that its omission leaves a gap that no other can fill so satisfactorily.

A. F. Thimus,⁵² who shares the view of Molitor⁵³ and of Meyer,⁵⁴ that the Sefer Yeṣirah was written in the later days of the Babylonian Exile, maintains that the Pythagorean philosophy is an adaptation from the Sefer Yeṣirah. It is quite remarkable that, according to the Hebrew sources, the Sefer Yeṣirah was diligently studied in the sixth century B. C., the period in which Pythagoras lived.

The "ילקוט ראובני" Lemberg 1860, 20a, quotes from a kabbalistic work פליאה, as follows:

ירמיה התחיל לעסוק בספר יצירה, יצאה בת קול ואמרה קנה לך חבר. הלך אצל סירא בנו נתעסקו בספר יצירה בשנים ולבסוף שעשו הכלל והמאמר נברא להם אדם אחר והיה כתוב במצחו אמת והיה סכין בידי אותו הנברא והיה מוחק אות א' של אמת וא"ל ירמיהו מאי האי א"ל אמשול לך משל למה"ר לאחד שהיה בונה כמה בתים כמה מדינות כמה מגדלות ולא היה אדם מרגיש באומנתו ולא במלאכתו כלל עד שפיתוהו ב' בני אדם ולימדו סוד אומנתו עד שידעו הכל ע"ד האמת וכשירדו האומנו' וסורו ותכונתו התחלו לקנטרו בדברים עד שנפרשו בחכמתו ונעשים בנאים כמותו מה שהוא היה עושה בדינר הם עושים בג' פשוטים, וכשהרגישו בהם בני אדם הניחו כבודו של זה האומן והולכים כולם אליהם ומכבדין אותם ועוסקים בהם בענין הבנין שהיו צריכי'.

⁵¹ Hagigah 12a.

⁵² *Die Harmonikale Symbolik*, Köln 1876, II, pp. VI, 2, 133, 241.

⁵³ *Philosophie der Geschichte oder die Tradition*, Frankfurt 1827, 63.

⁵⁴ Sefer Yeṣirah, Leipzig 1830, p. III.

“Jeremiah began to study Sefer Yeşirah, when a heavenly voice came forth and said: ‘Get thee an associate.’ He accordingly went to his son Sira, and they studied the Sefer Yeşirah together. Finally . . . a man was created by them, upon whose forehead was written ‘Emet’ (אמת = truth). The person created had a knife in his hand, and was erasing the letter Aleph of the word Emet. Jeremiah said to him, ‘Why do you that?’ He answered, ‘I will tell you a parable.’ This case is similar to that of a man who built many houses, countries, and towers, and no one appreciated his art or his work, until two men induced him to teach them the secret of his art, so that they knew it all thoroughly. When they learned the art, and the man’s secret and method, they began to irritate him with their words, and finally left him, taking his science with them and became builders like him. What he did for a *denarius*, they did for three *peshuṭim*. When people learned of their existence, they all left the original artisan and went to them, honoring them, and negotiating with them in their building enterprises.”

This passage, which may also be considered as having been prefixed originally to a copy of the Sefer Yeşirah, not only indicates that Jeremiah and Ben Sira studied the philosophy of the Sefer Yeşirah (or the invention of the alphabet), but also gives a reason why this study should be kept secret.

In his work *Sefer ha-Gematria*, Rabbi Judah he-Ḥasid says:⁵⁵

בן סירא רצה לעסוק בספר יצירה יצאה בת קול ואמרה לא תוכל
עשוהו לבדו הלך לו אצל ירמיהו אביו . . . ועסקו בו ולמקצה ג' שנים
נברא להם אדם אחד וכתוב במצחו אמת כמו במצח אדם הראשון אמר

⁵⁵ Quoted by Epstein in מקדמוניות היהודים, Wien 1887, p. 122.

להם האחד שבראו... הקב"ה... כשרצה להמית את אדם הראשון מחה אות מאמת ונמצא מת, כל שכן שאני רוצה לעשות כן ולא תבראו עוד אדם שלא ימעו בו העולם כדור אנוש, אמר להם אדם הנברא היפכו צרופ האותיות למפרע ומחקו א' מאמת שבמצחי ומיד נעשה לעפר.

"Ben Sira wanted to study the *Sefer Yeşirah*, when a heavenly voice came out and said: 'Thou canst not do it alone.' So he went to his father Jeremiah ... and they studied it. At the end of three years a man was created by them, on whose forehead was written Emet (אמת = truth), as on the forehead of Adam. Then the one whom they had created said to them: 'God created Adam, and when He wanted to put him to death, he erased a letter from the word Emet and it became Met (מת = dead). So much the more reason is there why I should want to do the same, so that you may not again create a man and the world go astray through him like the generation of Enosh...!' Then the man who had been created said to them: 'Transpose the order of the letters, and erase the Aleph from the word Emet (אמת) in my forehead. Immediately he turned into dust."

Though we cannot regard all these passages quoted as historical documents, we have no right to reject them entirely. A work like the *Sefer Yeşirah* could not have been entirely the product of one person, the one who actually put it into writing. Some of its contents must have been known, to at least a few persons, long before it was written down. It is, therefore, not at all impossible that the prophet Jeremiah and his grandson Ben Sira studied its philosophy.

J. J. L. Barges⁵⁶ quotes from the Paris Cod. 762 the following passage, which occurs also in the Brit. Mus. Cod. 15299:

⁵⁶ ספר תגין, Paris 1866, p. X.

אלו הם ה' ספרים וה' סדרים שגלה בן סירא לעזריאל בנו וליוסף
נכדו ספר יצירה ספר הגי [תגין] ספר דקדוק ספר פסיקתא רבתי בתרי
אפי ספר זרובבל ויש בו ה' פרקים פרק ר' שמעון בן יוחי פרק אבות
דרבי נתן פל' [פרק] אותיות דר' עקיבא פרק מעשה משכן פרק דרך
ארץ. ה' סדרים סדר עולם סדר תקופות סדר שיעות סדר עבור סדר
הלכות וכשגלה כל הרזים האלה רעשו כל צבא מרום ויצאה רוח הקדש
אמרה מי הוא שגלה סתרי לבני אדם עמד עצמ"ש [בן סירא] ואמר אני
בוזי בו בוזי אמר לו רייד מיד יושב יוסף וכתב מפי עצמ"ש [בן סירא]
אלו הדברים וכתבן ה' ספרים בארץ ספר יצירה וכו'...

"These are the five Sefarim (books) and the five Sedarim (orders) which Ben Sira revealed to his son Uziel, and his grandson Joseph, Sefer Yeṣirah, Sefer Tagin, Sefer Dikduk, Sefer Pesikta Rabbeti in two forms, Sefer Zerubabel, which contains five chapters: Simeon ben Yoḥai, Abot de rabbi Nathan, Otiot de rabbi Aḳiba, Maase Mishkan, Derek Ereṣ. The five Sedarim are: Seder Olam, Seder Teḳufot, Seder Shaot, Seder Ibbur, Seder Halakot, When he revealed all these secrets, all the host of heaven shook, and the holy spirit came out and said: 'Who is it that revealed my secrets to mankind?' עצמ"ש [Ben Sira] arose and said: 'I Buzi son of Buzi.' The holy spirit said to him: 'Enough.' Immediately Joseph sat down and wrote down these words at the dictation of עצמ"ש [Ben Sira], and he wrote them in five books on the earth: Sefer Yeṣirah, etc.

Although the greater part of this passage is obviously spurious, attributing, as it does, to Joseph ben Uziel works of well known authors who lived hundred of years later, it may be authentic with regard to the Sefer Yeṣirah, which heads the list. It is not unlikely that originally only the Sefer Yeṣirah had the ascription to Joseph ben Uziel, and as there were several other works in the same volume, some

ignorant copyist attributed them all to him. The original passage may have read as follows:

זה הוא ספר יצירה שגלה בן סירא לעוזיאל בנו וליוסף נכדו
וכשגלה הרז הזה רעשו כל צבא מרום ויצאה רוח הקדש אמרה מי הוא
זה שגלה סתרי לבני אדם עמר עצמ"ש ואמר אני בווי בן בווי, אמר לו
דיך, מיר יוסף וכתב מפני עצמ"ש ספר יצירה.

"This is the Sefer Yeṣirah, which Ben Sira revealed to his son Uziel, and his grandson Joseph. When he had revealed this secret, all the host of heaven trembled, and the holy spirit came out and said: "Who is it that has revealed my secret to mankind?" **עצמ"ש** arose and said: 'I Buzi son of Buzi.' Then the holy spirit said to him: 'Enough.' Immediately Joseph sat down and wrote down the Sefer Yeṣirah at the dictation of **עצמ"ש**."

From a passage of a commentary on the Sefer Yeṣirah of the thirteenth century, which is still extant in manuscript (Bodleian Library, Codex 1947), we can see that the commentator knew that the Sefer Yeṣirah was written by Joseph ben Uziel, for he says:

וזה לשון יוסף בן עוזיאל מפני ירמיה קול רוח דבור זה רוח הקדש...
והשב יוצר על מכוננו

"These are the words of Joseph ben Uziel, who received them from Jeremiah: 'Voice, air, speech,' this is the holy spirit.... and restore the creator to his abode."

As the commentator declares words in the Sefer Yeṣirah to be the language of Joseph ben Uziel, he evidently believed that he wrote it.

In another passage the commentator says:

כך יוסף בן עוזיאל מפני ירמיה הנביא נגלה סוד בבבל....

“So Joseph ben Uziel received from Jeremiah the Prophet. The secret was revealed in Babylonia.”

By סוד is apparently meant the Sefer Yeṣirah,⁵⁷ which he believed to have been revealed and transmitted to Joseph ben Uziel by the prophet Jeremiah. The commentator may have obtained this information from such passages as that mentioned above, in which it is said that Jeremiah and Ben Sira studied the philosophy of the Sefer Yeṣirah, and revealed it to Joseph ben Uziel, who committed it to writing. It is also possible that the commentator had before him an ancient text of the Sefer Yeṣirah, which had at the beginning בריתא דיוסף בן עזיאל, “Baraita of Joseph ben Uziel” and at the end סליק משנת אברהם ומשנת יוסף בן עזיאל “Here ends the Mishnah of Abraham and the Mishnah of Joseph ben Uziel.” Hence the heading and the ending of the commentary, which were taken by Recanati and other writers to mean that Joseph ben Uziel was the author of the commentary. This misunderstanding caused the bibliographers to catalogue it under the title בריתא דיוסף בן עזיאל or ספר יצירה.

In the Leipzig Codex (No. XXX, fol. 12) there is another treatise called בריתא דיוסף בן עזיאל, which A. Epstein⁵⁸ considers a work by the same author as the commentary. The quoted title was given to the treatise apparently because of the following passage occurring therein:

תני יוסף בן עזיאל שגילה לו ירמיה הנביא ואין לגלותו אלא לצנועים

“Joseph ben Uziel taught it. It was revealed to him by Jeremiah the prophet, and it must not be revealed to anyone

⁵⁷ Comp. Rashi on Jer. 23, 18 where סוד is explained by Sefer Yeṣirah.

⁵⁸ החוקר, Krakau-Wien 1893-95, II, p. 41.

except the pious" (the modest?). In this passage the author doubtless refers again to the *Sefer Yesirah*, which was revealed or handed down by the prophet Jeremiah to Joseph ben Uziel.

It is known that Ben Sira was only the family name of the author of *Ecclesiasticus*, which is believed to have been written in the third or second century B. C. About his given name, the opinions vary. According to some, it was Joshua (= Jesus); others say Simeon; still others, Eliezer. I am inclined to believe that one part of the book was written by the high-priest Simeon the Just, and the other by his brother Eliezer during the lifetime of the former; for concerning Simeon Eliezer says:

יֵאֵמַר עִם שְׁמֵעוֹן חֲסֵדוֹ וּבִימֵי יוֹשִׁיעֲנוּ.⁵⁹

"May his kindness be confirmed to Simeon and may he save us in his days."

These two brothers were descendants of the high-priest Joshua ben Jehozadak ben Seraiah, to whom the wisdom taught in *Ecclesiasticus* was attributed. Joshua ben Jehozadak was apparently also called Joshua ben Seraiah, which is really identical with Joshua ben Sira—as Ezra the scribe, for instance, was also called Ezra ben Seraiah.

Like *Ecclesiasticus*, the Pseudo-Ben Sira's "Alphabet of Ben Sira" was also attributed to Joshua ben Jehozadak. Hence its title in the Hebrew-German edition (Offenbach, 1728).⁶⁰

Isidore of Seville, in his remote day (620), identified Jesus, the son of Sirach, with Joshua ben Jehozadak, and in the Latin MSS. of *Ecclesiasticus*, it is stated that Ben

⁵⁹ Norbert Peters, *Ecclesiasticus*, Freiburg 1902, p. 429.

⁶⁰ Comp. *Ozar Yisrael*, New York 1909, vol. 3, p. 107.

Sira was a son of Jehozadak⁶¹ As Jewish tradition⁶² holds Ben Sira to have been a grandson of Jeremiah, we must assume that the prophet's daughter was the wife of Jehozadak. Joseph ben Uziel therefore was a grandson of Joshua ben Jehozadak, and, consequently, could not have written the Sefer Yeşirah later than at the end of the fifth century B. C.

As the Pythagorean number philosophy is doubtlessly identical with the Sefirot philosophy of the Sefer Yeşirah, therefore, by solving the latter the former has also been solved. We should therefore determine who were Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. Dr. A. Hirsh (*JQR.*, vol. XX, p. 61) doubts whether there ever was a Pythagoras, although he has no doubt there existed a Pythagorean school of philosophers. It is admitted (J. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, page 99) that "all that has come down to us under the names of various disciples of Pythagoras is pure forgery, of the most worthless kind. The whole early history of Pythagoreanism is therefore conjectural, and all we really know of the school is what we are told by Aristotle." According to some writers Pythagoras was a Greek, according to others, he was either a Phœnician or a Syrian. There have been also some writers who believe that he was a Jew.⁶³ He has even been identified with the prophet Ezekiel.⁶⁴ If Pythagoras was a Hebrew he should rather be identified with the high-priest Joshua son of Jehozadak. Philolaus, the first one to publish the Pythagorean philosophy, should be identified with Joseph ben

⁶¹ See Nestle in Hasting's *Bible Dictionary*, Vol IV, p. 542.

⁶² See "Alphabet of Ben Sira," n. p. n. d., p. 2.

⁶³ Rathgeber, *Grossgriechenland und Pythagoras*, Gotha 1866, pp. 325, 461, 466.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 534.

ספר יצירה

פרק א'

משנה א'

שְׁלִשִּׁים וּשְׁתַּיִם נְתִיבוֹת פְּלֹאוֹת
חֲכָמָה חֶקֶק יְהוָה יְהוּה צְבָאוֹת
בְּסוֹפֹר וּסְפּוֹר וּסְפָר :

משנה ב'

ואלו הן שלשים ושתים
נתיבות פלאות חכמה עשרים
ושתיים אותיות שהן עשר כפולות
ושתיים עשרה פשוטות :

משנה ג'

עשר אותיות כפולות
א, ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ז, ח, ט, י, יל, מ, נ,
עשר ולא תשע עשר ולא אחת
עשרה. שתיים עשרה אותיות
פשוטות ה, ז, ח, ט, י, יל, מ, נ,
ס, ע, צ, ק, שתיים עשרה ולא
אחת עשרה שתיים עשרה ולא

SEFER YESIRAH

Chap. I

§ I

Thirty-two mysterious
ways of wisdom has the
Lord, Lord of hosts, or-
dained through Scribe,
Script, and Scroll.

2

These are the thirty-two mysterious ways of wisdom, twenty-two letters, which are ten double and twelve simple.

§ 3

The ten double letters are א, ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ז, ח, ט, י, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven. The twelve simple letters are י, ל, מ, נ, ס, ע, צ, ק, ה, ז, ח, ט, twelve and not eleven; twelve and not thirteen.

שֵׁשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה בַּחֹן בַּחֹן וַחֲקֹר בָּהֶן
וְהַעֲמֵד דְּבַר עַל בֹּרִיו וְהִשָּׁב יוֹצֵר
עַל מְכוֹנּוֹ:

משנה ד'

עֲשִׂים וְשִׁתִּים אוֹתִיּוֹת
חֲקוֹקוֹת בְּקוֹל הַצּוֹבוֹת בְּרוּחַ
קְבוּעוֹת בְּפֶה בַּחֲמִשָּׁה מְקוֹמוֹת:

משנה ה'

עֲשִׂים וְשִׁתִּים אוֹתִיּוֹת חֲקֹן
חֲצֹבֵן שְׁקֵלֹן וְהַמִּירֵן צֶרֶפֶן וְצֹר
מֵהֶן אֵת כָּל הַיִּצּוֹר וְאֵת כָּל הָעֵתִיד
לְצֹר:

משנה ו'

כִּיצַד צֶרֶפֶן שְׁקֵלֹן וְהַמִּירֵן אֵלֶּף
עִם כּוֹלֵן וְכוֹלֵן עִם אֵלֶּף, בֵּית עִם
כוֹלֵן וְכוֹלֵן עִם בֵּית וְכֵן כּוֹלֵן וְכוֹלֵן
חֲזָרוֹת חֲלִילָה נִמְצָא כָּל הַדְּבָר
וְכָל הַיִּצּוֹר יוֹצֵא מֵהֶן:

Investigate them, examine them, establish the matter clearly, and restore the Creator to His abode.

§ 4

Twenty-two letters are engraved by the voice, hewn out in the air, and established by the mouth in five places.

§ 5

Twenty-two letters He engraved, hewed out, weighed, changed, combined, and formed out of them all existing forms, and all forms that may in the future be called into existence.

§ 6

How did He combine them, weigh them, and change them around? א with all of them and all of them with א; ב, with all of them and all of them with ב; and so forth, all of them turning around in order; thus all words and all forms are derived from them.

משנה ז'

עשרים ושתים אותיות
קבועות בגלגל בארבע מאות
ושמונים וארבעה שערים וחזור
הגלגל פנים ואחור וסימן לדבר
עין למעלה ענג ועין למטה ננע:

§ 7

Twenty-two letters are engraved in a circle, with 484 divisions, and the circle turns forward and backward; thus in ענג [delight], the ע is at the beginning; in ננע [plague], the ע is at the end.

משנה ח'

שתי אבנים בונות שני בתים,
שלוש אבנים בונות ששה בתים,
ארבע אבנים בונות עשרים
וארבעה בתים, חמש אבנים
בונות מאה ועשרים בתים, שש
אבנים בונות שבע מאות ועשרים
בתים, שבע אבנים בונות
חמשת אלפים וארבעים בתים,
מכאן ואילך צא וחשוב מה שאין
הפה יכול לדבר ואין האוזן יכולה
לשמוע:

§ 8

Out of two stones two houses are built, out of three stones six houses are built, out of four stones twenty-four houses are built, out of five stones one hundred and twenty houses are built, out of six stones seven hundred and twenty houses are built, out of seven stones five thousand and forty houses are built. Go and count further, what the mouth is unable to pronounce, and the ear is unable to hear.

פרק ב'

משנה ט'

צורה וממיר ועושה את כל
היצור ואת כל הדבור בשם אחד

Chap. II

§ 9

He combines and changes about and makes

נמצא כל היצור וכל הדבור יוצא
משם אחד :

משנה י'

שלוש אמות אמש סוד גדול
מופלא ומכוסה שמהן יוצאים
רוח מים אש, אש למעלה ומים
למטה ורוח מכריע בינתיים,
וסימן לדבר מ"ם דוממת שין
שורקת ואלף מכריע בינתיים :

משנה י"א

שלוש אמות אמ"ת סוד גדול
מופלא ומכוסה ומהן יוצאים
רוח מים עפר, ארבע אמות
אמש"ת שהן חמשה אבות שמהן
נולדו עשרים ושבעה תולדות :

משנה י"ב

חמשה אבות כל אחד לברו
עומד ועשרים ושבעה תולדות
כולם אדוקים באבות, עשאן
כמין מדינה וערכן כמין מלחמה,

all forms and all words
with the One Name; thus
all forms and all words are
derived from the One
Name.

§ 10

Three vowels אמש consti-
tute a great secret, mar-
vellous and hidden. From
them go forth air, water,
and fire. Fire above and
water below, and air holds
the balance between them;
thus מ is mute ש is hiss-
ing, and א holds the bal-
ance between them.

§ 11

Three vowels אמ"ת con-
stitute a great secret, mys-
terious and hidden. From
them go forth air, water,
and earth. Four vowels
אמש"ת, which are five vow-
els, that gave birth to
twenty-seven consonants.

§ 12

The five vowels stand
each one by itself, but the
twenty-seven consonants
are all dependent on the
vowels. He made them in

וארון יחיד אל מלך נאמן מושל
בכולן ממעון קדשו עד ערי עד:

the form of a state, and arranged them like an army in battle array. The only One Master, God, the faithful King, rules over them from His holy abode forever and ever.

משנה י"ג

חמשה אבות ועשרים ושבעה
תולדות אלו עשרים ושתיים
אותיות שיסר יה יהוה צבאות
מעשר ספירות ובלוימה :

§ 13

The five vowels and twenty-seven consonants, these are the twenty-two letters which the Lord, Lord of hosts, established out of the ten digits and zero.

פרק ג'

משנה י"ד

עשר ספירות ובלוימה כלום
פיך מלרבר ולבך מלהרהר ואם רץ
לבך שוב למקום כי על דבר זה
נכרת ברית :

Chap. III

§ 14

The ten digits and zero—close thy mouth from speaking and thy heart from thinking, and if thy heart should leap, bring it back to its place; for concerning this has the covenant been made.

משנה ט"ו

עשר ספירות ובלוימה נעוץ
סופן בתחלתן ותחלתן בסופן
כשלהבת קשורה בנחלת הבן
בחכמה וחכם בבינה שארון יחיד

§ 15

The ten digits and zero, their end is joined with their beginning, and their beginning with their end,

ואין לו שני ולפני אחד מה אתה
סופר :

as the flame is attached to the coal. Understand wisdom and be wise in understanding, that there is but one Master, and there is no second to Him, and before One, what countest thou?

משנה ט"ז

עשר ספירות ובלוימה צפייתן
כמראה הבזק ותכליתן אין להן
סוף דברו בהן ברצוא ושוב
ולמאמרו כסופה ירדפו ולפני
כסאו הן משתחוות :

§ 16

The ten digits and zero, their appearance is like lightning; to their aim there is no limit. They go and come at His word, and at His command they pursue like the whirlwind, and kneel before His throne.

משנה י"ז

אלה הן העשר ספירות ובלוימה
שבהן חקק את עולמו אל חי
העולמים ברוך ומבורך שמו:

§ 17

These are the ten digits and zero, with which the Eternally Living God, blessed be His name, ordained His world.

משנה י"ח

אחת חקק וחצב בה קול רוח
ורבור וזה רוח הקדש :

§ 18

One—He graved and hewed out of it voice, air and speech, and this is the Holy Spirit.

משנה י"ט

שתים חקק וחצב בהן תהו
ובהו, תהו זה קו ירוק שמקיף
את כל העולם כולו, ובהו אלו

§ 19

Two—He graved and hewed out of them void and chaos. Void is a green

אבנים מפולמות המשוקעות
בתהום שמהן יוצאים מים :

line that surrounds the whole universe, and chaos refers to viscous stones, sunk in the abyss, whence water comes forth.

משנה כ'

שֶׁלֶשׁ חֲקַק וְחָצַב בָּהֶן רֶפֶשׁ
וּמִיטָ עֲשָׂאן כַּמִּין עֲרוּגָה הִצִּיבָן
כַּמִּין חוֹמָה סִכְכָּן כַּמִּין מַעֲזִיבָה
וַיִּצַק עֲלֵיהֶם שֶׁלֶג וְנָעֲשֶׂה עֹפֶר :

§ 20

Three—He graved and hewed out of them mud and clay. He arranged them like a garden bed. He set them up like a wall. He covered them like a pavement, and poured upon them snow, and the earth was formed.

משנה כ"א

אַרְבַּע חֲקַק וְחָצַב בָּהֶן כֶּסֶם
הַכְּבוֹד וְאוֹפָנִים וְשֶׁרָפִים וְחַיּוֹת
הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּמַלְאכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת :

§ 21

Four—He graved and hewed out of them the throne of glory, the ophanim, the seraphim, the holy animals, and the ministering angels.

משנה כ"ב

יָצַר מֵתָהוּ מִמַּשׁ וְעָשָׂה אֵינוֹ
יִשְׁנוּ וְחָצַב אֲבָנִים גְּדוֹלּוֹת מְאוֹר
שֶׁאֵינוֹ נִתְפֵּשׁ וְסִימָן לְדַבֵּר עֲשָׂרִים
וּשְׁתֵּים מֵנִינָן וְרוּחַ אֶחָד .

§ 22

He formed existence out of void, something out of nothing, and he hewed large stones out of intangible air, thus twenty-two in number one in spirit.

משנה כ"ג

גם את זה לעומת זה עשה
האלהים, טוב לעומת רע, ורע
לעומת טוב, טוב מטוב, ורע
מרע, הטוב מבחין את הרע,
והרע מבחין את הטוב, טובה
שמורה לטובים ורעה שמורה
לרעים:

§ 23

Also God set the one
over against the other,
good against evil, and evil
against good; good out of
good, and evil out of evil;
good testing evil, and evil
testing good; good is stor-
ed away for the good, and
evil is stored away for the
evil.

משנה כ"ד

וכיון שעמד אברהם אבינו
והביט וראה וחקר והבין וחקק
והצב וצרף וצר וחשב ועלתה
בירו הבריאה אז נגלה עליו ארון
הכל וכרת ברית לו ולזרעו עד
עולם, כרת לו ברית בין עשר
אצבעות ידיו והוא ברית הלשון
וכרת לו ברית בין עשר אצבעות
רגליו והוא ברית המילה וקשר
עשרים ושתים אותיות התורה
בלשונו ונגלה לו את סודן משכן
במים דלקן באש רעשן ברוח
ונתכן לעשר כפולות ושתים
עשרה פשוטות:

§ 24

When Abraham our
father arose, he looked and
saw and investigated and
observed and engraved and
hewed and combined and
formed and calculated, and
his creation was successful.
Then the Master of all re-
vealed Himself to him,
and made a covenant with
him and with his seed
forever. He made a cov-
enant with him on the ten
fingers of his hands, and
this is the covenant of the
tongue; and on the ten
toes of his feet, and this is
the covenant of circumcis-
ion; and tied the twenty-
two letters of the Torah to

his tongue and revealed to him their secret. He drew them through water; stormed through air, He kindled them in fire, and melted them into ten double and twelve simple letters.

Corrections to *JQR.*, New Series, II, 557 ff.

- P. 564, l. 25. For letters, read letter.
- P. 564, l. 26. For combination by read combination **אב** by.
- P. 567, l. 11. For i-a-o-u-i read i-a-o-u-e.
- P. 567, l. 26. For Ashkenaztic read Ashkenazic.
- P. 569, l. 8. For **ב** read **א**. For **ז** read **ב**.
- P. 569, l. 9. For and the **א** and **ז** read and the **א**.
- P. 570. Footnote beginning, Dr. H. Malter, should be footnote on P. 571.
- P. 577, l. 22. For water read snow.
- P. 579, l. 25. For numerals read numbers.
- P. 581, l. 25. For vowel letters, but read vowel letters **י**, but.